



CARRY SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL
IN YOUR HEART

LENTEN DEVOTIONAL 2022

Dear Reader,

“...since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...”
– Hebrews 12:1

Lent can be a deeply personal time for renewal and reflection. In the early church, it was the time when new converts prepared for baptism by prayer, study and fasting.

This collection of writings is offered to you for your own Lenten meditations. Each reflection is unique, written by a diverse group of people from diverse backgrounds, sharing their faith and their stories. There is one devotion for each day of Lent, starting on Ash Wednesday, March 2.

Please join us in these readings and all our Lenten opportunities for online worship, service, prayer and observance. The full calendar of the season is available on our website, www.santamonicaumc.org/lent. Information is also available by calling the church office at (310)393-8258.

First United Methodist Church of Santa Monica
Spiritual Formation Council

MARCH 2: ASH WEDNESDAY

Isaiah 58:1-12

“If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it must be a duck.”

“If they pray like a Christian, have ashes placed on their forehead like a Christian, goes to church like a Christian, they must be a Christian.”

How wonderfully this works! In the scripture today, Isaiah is pointing out the similarity to those who fast. However, he asks the question: why they are fasting? It looks good to others who look upon them as people who steadfastly do this for God's favor. These same people do the same and become frustrated by the fact that after all the trouble of fasting, God does not answer their prayers.

Today's lesson tells us that God knows what is really in our hearts. If we follow the lessons of Jesus, but are simply doing it for looks, don't expect God to pay attention to your actions. Today, and during this time of Lent, we should look deep within ourselves and closely examine what God will see. Certainly, something to think about today.

Prayer:

Dear God,

Help me to look within today. Help me to see that what I do, in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ, comes from my heart. Today, I will make you proud that I am your child.

Amen.

Ron Theile

THURSDAY, MARCH 3

Joel 2: 1-2, 12-17

Joel is offering hope to people during a natural disaster of swarming locusts. He also promises that God will pour out His Spirit. We too have been through hard times with the COVID pandemic and we may have other circumstances in our lives that cause hard times. When you are in the midst of a hard time, do you look to God for help and gain renewed hope?

God's words in Joel are helpful, reminding us that God is "gracious and merciful." He is "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." Let's listen when He says, "Return to me with all your heart."

Sometimes besides prayer and meditation we can hear God's word delivered to us through a friend. Another helpful way is to put into writing your struggle. Then prayerfully consider how to turn a negative situation into a more positive blessing both for yourself and for others.

God has promised us a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit. When I wake up in the morning I can say, "Thank you for today." When I go to sleep at night, I can say, "Thank you for today and for tomorrow."

Today is a Gift, that's why it is called the Present.

Life is a Blessing.

Let's thank God daily!

Joyce Landsverk

FRIDAY, MARCH 4

Matthew 6:1-6

My New Year's resolution for 2022 is to spend more time living in the present moment. When I was an improv student in Chicago back in the late 80's and early 90's, I quickly learned about staying in the moment on stage with the idea that you are so deeply rooted in the now that it's impossible overthink your next move or worse, judge yourself. Simultaneously, I became aware that the more I carried that idea into my regular life, the more empowered I felt as a human being. But yet as I get further and further into middle age, I struggle with this notion. When I say being in the present moment, I mean no looking back feeling all nostalgic about what was and no sitting around trying to guess what's coming next. Just being.

I can't help but wonder if any of you might be struggling with this as well. If so, I invite you to join me as we go forward into 2022 to find some activities, preferably in the morning, to bring you to the present moment. In doing so, perhaps you can find something positive, something beautiful to take with you throughout your day. For those of us who haven't quite gotten on the meditation train, here are some ideas. Go for a walk with the intention of taking in and noticing the beauty around you. Maybe say a friendly hello to a stranger. If you drink coffee or tea, pick a different spot in the house or outside where you can enjoy your morning ritual from a different point of view. Sometimes when we change things up with just a slightly different mindset, we become present and therefore open to so much that otherwise might have been lost.

Yesterday, I was sitting at my dining room table writing this very devotional entry with my back to an open window, when all of a sudden there was a hummingbird flutter sound right behind me, close enough that I could feel the tiny wind its movement caused on the back of my neck. By the time I turned my head to look, he was hovering over the middle of the yard. Well needless to say, I got was brought to the present moment. Not only did I carry that feeling throughout the day, it's still with me. Legends say that hummingbirds float free of time, carrying our hopes for love, joy and celebration. The hummingbird's delicate grace reminds us that life is rich, beauty is everywhere, every personal connection has meaning and that laughter is life's sweetest creation.

Melanie Hutsell

SATURDAY, MARCH 5

Matthew 6:16-21

This is one of my favorite chapters of the Bible! I recall meditating on the first part in a prior devotional writing. So I'll focus on the second part this time.

When I go home to visit my parents it is very difficult for me to be able to pick up the tab for anything even when I have the means. When my dad treats, he will often say, "You can't take it with you."

Now that may at first sound like the opposite of what verses 19 through 21 have to say. But it's really not.

My parents are generous and I'm grateful they set a Christian example for me. Their giving to others was just a normal part of life. Great attention wasn't drawn to it. It was as basic as cleaning house, planning a meal, paying the bills, going to church, or getting ready for work or school. The offering envelopes were set out on the kitchen table the night before church. Single people in the community were often invited over to share a meal with us. Fundraising dinners at all churches in the community were attended. Neighborly good deeds were performed (and received).

Rather than give in to the culture of American consumerism, my parents bought mostly only what they needed and of high quality that lasts. Items weren't replaced until they broke down.

Let us all share what we have with others. With those we know. With strangers. With those in need. Let's not store it up in our houses where moth and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal. Instead of carrying the latest iPhone, let's carry something beautiful in our hearts. And then we will have treasure in heaven. After all, you can't take it with you.

Holly Pitrago

SUNDAY, MARCH 6

Psalm 51:1-17

Despite what many of you may assume, I was baptised in a Catholic church. My grandmother, who was Irish Catholic, worried that if anything happened to me, only a Catholic baptism would save me from an eternity in purgatory. Not Methodist, or Baptist or, God forbid, Church of England. So there I was, fresh from the womb, with just enough sin on me to doom my soul without having knowingly committed a single sin. Of course, I was guilty of sloth, I was too lazy to learn to walk, feed myself or even verbally communicate. Of course, I was guilty of greed, I demanded milk at any and all hours as was my right. I was too prideful to use a bottle and too gluttonous to give my parents a full night's rest.

In several editions of today's text, verse 5 tells of how each of us is born by sin, with sin, into sin. Since the beginning of the end in the Garden of Eden, humanity has carried sin and passed it to their descendants. The text continues, asking to be cleaned and returned to purity. I for one, cannot conceive of anything more pure than a child, especially a baby. And yet, in this same passage, we have put the burden of sin upon them.

The passage is in first person, directed to themselves in rage over their own mistakes. We are each our own worst critics. We are all so busy looking to forgive one another for their slights against us that we often forget to forgive ourselves. As Easter approaches, I invite you to consider what you are holding on to. What mistakes do you still hold in your heart? What about yourself have you not forgiven? You have broke your own heart in your self anger, hatred and doubt. God invites you to learn from this, to find ways to move forward better for it and in doing so forgive yourself. He is ready to forgive you.

Molly Smith

MONDAY, MARCH 7

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

I began to meditate two years ago to deal with the stress of the pandemic. When I started, I thought that meditation was going to be about relaxation. The more I meditate the more I realize that the purpose of meditation is to learn to quiet your mind so that you can appreciate what is before you and what you are doing each moment. Once you have learned to be present in the moment, you can truly have joy in your daily experiences.

When I read the Scripture, it struck me that many times we don't give God proper thanks for our blessings. We thank God without stopping to meditate and take stock of what God has given us. It is only when we take our time to appreciate and name God's blessings that we can truly be joyful in thanksgiving.

Prayer: Thank you Lord for all of the gifts you have given us this year, for our health, our families, our friends, and our church community. Help us be mindful of all of our blessings. Amen.

Glenda Martinez

TUESDAY, MARCH 8

Psalm 91:1-6

“My God; in him will I trust.”

My parents urged me to dedicate my life to service. I choose to pursue a career in law enforcement, specializing in criminal investigation. The FBI provided me the appropriate avenue and in addition to my college degree, I was required to have three years of experience as a commissioned officer in the military. I applied to the Air Force & Navy; however, they were only looking for candidates for pilots, due to losses in the Vietnam War. I was advised that the best leadership training for my ultimate objective was the Marine Corps.

I entered the Marine Corps Officer Training Program but was never planning to join the infantry. I was able to choose my Marine Corps specialty, which was not infantry. However, my commander advised me that my scores in tactics and combat leadership were outstanding and if I didn't choose infantry, someone else, not as qualified may command a Platoon of combat Marines and possibly get people killed, my choice.

I spent the night wrestling with this choice, praying and asking why, when I was trying to prepare myself for a career in law enforcement, would God lead me into a combat leadership position, during a war, in a position where life expectancy was not good? I “Trusted In Him,” and selected infantry.

I spent 12 months leading Marines in combat. I was able to make sound tactical decisions continuously in the middle of hours long battles, with bullets impacting all around me, some so close as to cause me flesh wounds. It was like I was being led by a spirit and during the heat of battle, was able to remain calm and provide steady leadership. I and many of my Marines survived this horrible experience. This was what I was being called to do, even though I didn't understand why, at the time. But, as the scripture says, “Thou shall not be afraid for the terror by night nor for the arrow that flieth by day.”

Larry Wilson

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 9

Luke 4:1-13

The 2nd week of Lent brings us to a familiar passage, The Temptation of Jesus. Jesus had been in the desert for 40 days when Satan comes to tempt him. While it may already feel as though it has been 40 days in your Lenten practice, it is still early in our journey and that makes it appropriate to consider the temptations that Christ was offered.

Temptations are most effective when they are timely. Satan found an opportunity after Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness. Satan makes an appeal to the body - after all, after 40 days of fasting who wouldn't be hungry? He then tries to seduce Jesus with popularity and authority to counter the isolation of his time alone. Finally, Satan challenges Jesus to put himself in peril to have God send angels to protect him. Jesus summarily resists all 3 offers, frustrating the devil and sending him away.

As we emerge from the pandemic are we at another of those opportune times? Aren't we itching to forgo home cooking and takeout for dinner at a nice restaurant? Looking forward to visiting friends after self-isolating? Isn't it normal to question why God brought these last 2 years of COVID into our lives?

This Lenten season, even more than in the past, we need to resist the temptation to rush out to resume our old lives. We need to reflect over the past 2 difficult years to consider what we learned about ourselves, our lives and our faith. We need to remember how we cared for others and cherished precious time spent with friends, family and community. We need to have faith that God brought us through this pandemic and that he will lead us to good times again. We need to recognize the beautiful things rekindled in our hearts and carry them forward on our Lenten journey and into our renewed post-COVID lives. We need to resist temptation and re-dedicate our faith just as Jesus did to put him on his path to ministry.

Ben Ing

THURSDAY, MARCH 10

Psalm 91:9-16

When I read this passage, instead of reassuring me, it made me nervous. I understand that God protects His people, and that “no evil shall befall” us because He “will protect those who know” His name. But as I read this, I try to avoid thinking about all the people who did not appear to have God’s deliverance – bad things can happen to people.

Then I think about all the times that God did deliver me, especially when I prayed for His help. I think about the times I felt lucky or when something happened that made me think, “Well, that worked out!” and realize that was God answering me. I also acknowledge the times God must be working behind the scenes to protect me from situations, and I have no idea He ever helped me. I also think about the times where an event in my life seemed to be going the wrong way, and then later realize things worked out better than how I originally thought they should have happened.

I used to think “mercy” and “grace” were the same. But I learned that mercy can be extended to you when you have done something wrong, while grace is the free favor and goodness that God offers all people, even when we do not deserve it. An anecdote that illustrates the difference: You are speeding home and get pulled over by law enforcement, and you explain why (late for mom’s birthday). If the police officer chooses not to give you a ticket, that would be mercy. You deserve the ticket for doing something wrong (speeding), but the officer did not punish you. If the officer then gives you a gift card for free flowers to present to your mom, that is an example of grace (an offering of a gift, a favor, that you did not necessarily deserve).

I do not have a satisfactory answer for why bad things can happen to people. But I do know we, all of us, have both God’s grace and mercy. If we call on Him, He will answer. That is something beautiful I choose to carry in my heart.

Mira Pak

FRIDAY, MARCH 11

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Paul wrote a lot of letters. Methinks one too many, as I have to write this Lenten devotional about a passage from one of them! In this message, he refers to us as Ambassadors for Christ, and describes how we are to approach being ministers, passing on the truth to the world.

Sounds like too tough a job for my skill set. According to Paul, we ministers on behalf of Christ must give no offense, have endurance, patience in good times and bad, show pureness, love without hypocrisy, possessing nothing yet having everything! In this age of incivility and rampant cynicism, Paul seems out of step and who in their right mind would volunteer to carry such burdens freely?

How can I fix or inspire others? How can I be an Ambassador to others when my life – any of our lives – is roiled by anxiety, depression, worry, self-doubt, anger? Who could possibly select me as an Ambassador for Christ?

I guess the 12 disciples asked themselves those same questions when Jesus called them. They must have had doubts. Despite our knowledge of Christ's story, his sacrifice for us, the path to Heaven is still bumpy and hard. But maybe that is what it means to be a "practicing" Christian. Our hearts keep struggling with the hope that we will find the beauty in life, in one another. Maybe that is what keeping the faith is all about.

Michael V. Lamb

SATURDAY, MARCH 12

Romans 10:8b-13

Paul was primarily an apostle to the Gentiles, and here he is affirming that Christ's good news was meant for all people without regard to religious status or any other kind of identity. All are meant to have a redemptive relationship with God! Paul's use of "saving" language reflects a different historical context which may not be helpful to us. The point is for us to know God's love and commit to living in harmony with God's design for life. And Christ is the one who points the way.

I think Paul's message may have an even greater relevance in our day. We have been living in a time when it was assumed that a relationship with God entailed following certain prescribed "religious" forms—as though a kind of code were involved. Today we are seeing more "secular" styles of taking God seriously—new venues for worship, new styles of music and meditation, new expressions of spirituality. A different time calls for relevant forms. But the goal of a meaningful relationship with God remains the same—and Christ is still one who makes God known to us.

May this Lent be a time when we are drawn into a closer walk with God—in fellowship with many of diverse perspectives who share this goal with us.

Rev. Larry Young

SUNDAY, MARCH 13

Psalm 27:1-6

While writing this devotional, I realized that it would be published two years to the day after our health system decided that we would be transitioning to video or phone appointments for any visits that did not require in-person care. We were just beginning to learn about COVID, and uncertainty and fears began to grow in virtually every aspect of life for everyone. Would we or our loved ones become ill and die from COVID? Would we be able to get groceries and other necessities? Will jobs be placed on hold? Would we be able to join friends and family for gatherings? Some combination of these questions faced everyone.

While today's reading is David's declaration of faith in God's protection from military enemies and attack, our community and world suddenly faced a wide range of direct and indirect threats from COVID. When faced with seemingly insurmountable dangers, we can take comfort from and follow the examples of the times David faced fears in life confident in God's strong, loving protection and presence, from facing Goliath as a youth to fierce military battles as an adult.

Two years later, we have many reasons to be thankful: we are able to worship in person again, reconnect with friends, and venture outside of home confident that simple precautions can let us do so safely. However, many still face battles and hardships from illness, grief, or other struggles that have arisen from the pandemic. We can continue to rely on God's presence to get us through challenges that come our way, to provide encouragement to those in fear, and comfort to those who are suffering.

Bill Buxton

MONDAY, MARCH 14

Psalm 27:7-14

I'll be honest, this scripture floored me. I am not a regular Bible peruser but know a respectable number of passages from working with my earlier employers (wink wink). This being my first devotional, I was worried I was going to have to reflect on one that might as well be written in Latin. I read the Psalm a few times when I received it, scratched my head in disbelief then looked around as if I were being watched, alone in my own home. *Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me.*

2021 was incredibly challenging for my family, on top of it being year two of our maddening pandemic. The Carduccis were hurled into heartbreak like an anchor into the freezing ocean, and my warrior survival mode was activated. Pain and love were the same and I rejected both to make it through some days and nights. I loved and smiled only for my children, but even that was hard.

Your face, Lord, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. But it was I who turned away from God. I couldn't allow myself to feel God. I couldn't face those whom I've experienced God with. I couldn't bring myself to pray regardless of how I understand to receive God's love. My faith is strong, however, for the longest time, during this awfully tough time, I was truly not able to understand that I was still worthy of it.

Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence.

The thought of rejecting God, or rather my blind ability to, still makes me cry. I didn't realize that could be my truth. Then I remember the gifts and angels only God could have sent to me as I've desperately needed them lately and my heart aches with gratitude.

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage.

Life is still challenging for us, of course, but with God's love, I'm pretty certain I'll be OK. We'll all be OK.

Thank you, God, for the reassurance. I love you.

Shalimar Carducci

TUESDAY, MARCH 15

Genesis 15:1-6

Usually, when people think of a reward, they think of it as something of monetary value or something to be passed on to future generations. I think Abram was initially thinking along those lines too.

Instead, God had another reward in mind. The reward of family and connection. “Look at the stars and try to count the stars; you will have as many descendants as that.”

During COVID, we’ve come to understand family as a reward. We’ve enjoyed spending unrushed time together as a family and to really connect without distraction. We’ve also been separated for long periods of time, particularly when family members are far away. We look forward to the opportunity to re-connect and see each other again. Being in person and exchanging hugs, is truly going to be a reward!

The reward of family and connection can also have a broader meaning than just our immediate family relations. It can also extend to all of those who we share a personal connection or relationship with, including friends, neighbors, and those in our church community.

The reward for relationship and connection is the joy of the time spent together and the memories created together. It is something beautiful to carry in your heart.

Leanne, Brandon, Emily, and Hannah Franklin

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 16

Luke 13:31-35

Luke 13:31-35 is subtitled “Jesus’ Sorrow for Jerusalem.” When I read this, a gasp came out of my mouth because my brother, Joseph, is in Jerusalem studying Hebrew and Scripture. Joseph has been in Jerusalem for the past seven months and enjoys Jerusalem. He is astonished by the celebration of life, love, and compassion. However, we recently had a conversation where he said that customer service is more hostile in Jerusalem than here. Also, when someone buys something in bulk, the store charges you more, not less like at Costco. I then proceeded with: “It makes sense that the culture in Israel might be hostile with the adversity that the country has faced.”

Going to the scripture, Jesus is ignoring the Pharisees’ telling him to go away because Herod wants to kill him: “Go tell that fox, ‘I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day until I reach my goal’” (32). Despite the Pharisees’ fears and Jesus’ refusal of their help, Jesus just ignores them. He continues to provide them with everlasting healing, compassion, and love in Jerusalem.

After reflecting back on the scripture, I realize that the Pharisees are not as bad as everyone is making them out to be. They are willing to risk their own lives to be killed so Jesus’ life could be salvaged. Risking your own life to preserve someone else’s is one of most selfless acts one can do.

In Luke 13:31-35 we see Jesus carrying Jerusalem in his heart in the midst of the chaos. He saw the beauty of the people even when they couldn’t see it themselves. He continues to help them even when they plead for him to go.

This scripture is a reminder that even if you’ve had an unpleasant experience the key is to find something beautiful in that experience just like Jesus did with the Pharisees. Sometimes it is easier to carry something beautiful in your heart than something negative. Remember that there’s beauty in you, in me, and in everything around us. Sometimes you just need a reminder to look.

Blessing,

Mia Staraci

THURSDAY, MARCH 17

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Our daily troubles and challenges can keep our minds focused on the next "earthly thing" we need to tackle. It is all too easy for our focus to shift away from the bigger picture of God's promises for us, and instead ruminate on daily to-do-lists, problems, disappointment, recognition, highs, lows and the list goes on. God has heavenly promises for us that we lose sight of.

In this passage from Philippians, Paul the Apostle reminds us that God has promised us a gift from our Lord Jesus Christ that is greater than our earthly happenings. We are reminded that "our citizenship is in heaven," where we will one day meet our Savior who will transform us in His kingdom. How special is that? As we walk through Lent, I encourage all of us to carry the beautiful gift of "citizenship in heaven," bestowed to us by our Lord, in our hearts. When life gets challenging, we can all try to remember this gift and shift our mind from earthly to heavenly goals. We can be the example of Jesus Christ for others, as well as seek out fellow brothers and sisters in Christ that "live as we do."

In this passage's "Closing Appeal for Steadfastness and Unity," Paul encourages us to persevere, eagerly awaiting the Lord, as brothers, sisters and dear friends in Christ.

"Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!" (Philippians 4:1)

Lindsay Crossan

FRIDAY, MARCH 18

Psalm 42:1-5

“As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God.”

New King James Version

Panting is common in animals, but alarming in humans: hard, quick breathing and gasping for air may be cause for a 911 call. Other translations substitute “longs” for “pants,” but “panting” implies urgency: the Psalmist’s soul is critically unwell. The soul, in a state of spiritual breathlessness, dehydration, and depletion, looks to God, yearning for resuscitation.

Spiritual unwellness is the chronic, untreated disconnection from God. The soul feels at once both heavy and hollow as if it were below God’s reach. In truth, the unwell soul, shackled by its own obstinance, retreats from God, and turns the heaviness and the hollowness inward.

God freely gives his good, soul-filling bread and pours out his living water, but the unwell soul goes hungry, following its own design instead of God’s, as one in surroundings darkened by a power failure, futilely groping for a light switch.

God’s bread and water cure spiritual unwellness. They also prevent it. God’s harvest is bountiful. Its larder never closes. Your table is ready.

Linda Diane Anderson

SATURDAY, MARCH 19

Luke 9:28-36

Jesus knew his time was running out. He had upset the authorities too many times. He knew he needed to prepare for his death. He retreated with his closest disciples to a hilltop. It was a little too much for his disciples, though. They didn't understand what was going on, but they knew it was important. They wanted to build a monument even before Jesus was dead. But Jesus was still alive, still teaching and healing. God reminded the disciples of that.

I know people who have backed out of all activities and relationships. They blame it on age or the pandemic. And yet there are others whose bodies are broken and whose energy flags and they keep reaching out and uplifting others who are in need. Like Jesus, we are alive until we aren't alive anymore, and we have things to do to make this world a better place. Life itself is a gift we can hold in our hearts and value for as long as we have it.

Jean Stapleton

SUNDAY, MARCH 20

Luke 13:1-5

Re • pent, verb

My actions. Less bad?
A scale? Intent? Feel remorse.
Heart's regret. Repent.

- Art Dodd, Jr.

MONDAY, MARCH 21

Luke 13:6-9

If I were the tree in this parable, I would let out a huge sigh of relief – particularly because I have the tendency to focus too much on whether I am productive and efficient! The tree is given a second chance! The tree is not left strictly to its own, self-contained resources, but given special attention, and nutrients to help it flourish.

This parable reminds me once again of God's grace and that God hopes for all of us to thrive when we absorb that grace.

In the context of Jesus's teaching in Luke 13, this parable also reminds us that repentance is an important part of receiving God's grace. Again, if I were this tree, I would first need to identify that relying on my own self-contained resources is not enough for me to thrive. I need help. I can try my hardest to produce fruit but if I am not willing to admit my own shortcomings, or my need for help, I cannot accept the generous gifts of others and God that make it possible for me to grow to my fullest potential. This shift in perspective about who I am and the grace God offers me is a form of repentance.

In what areas of your life have you relied too much on your own will and resources? In what ways can you ask for help at this time? What limitations might you need to admit, so that you can thrive with the help of others?

God of creation,

Help us prepare our soil for the nutrients of your grace. Amen.

Rev. Keri Olsen Paget

TUESDAY, MARCH 22

Psalm 63:1-8

David is in the wilderness and praying to God. It's not just any wilderness. It's as desolate as one can only imagine if your mentor tried to kill you. Or worse, your own offspring planned to murder you. Some scholars have tried to place the context of David's journey as he attempted to escape the dangerous intentions, first of King Saul and later, his own son, Absalom. How does he confront despair? With something beautiful in his heart. ...a love song of praise to the Creator.

It made me think of torture victims I see at one of the clinics where I work. What sustained them I often wonder, when they were betrayed, abused, forgotten? Only by something beautiful in their heart.

Are these the words of a hunted, wandering prey, or those of a delirious prisoner, fantasizing the world as it might be: water, food, protection, justice. Verses beyond v8 include the less humane, but clearly, human desire—revenge. But that's at the end. What really sustains David, and unjustly afflicted detainees, might be "something beautiful in their heart": The dream of love and comfort.

If one acknowledges and praises love and kindness, believes in their power...perhaps they will come.

It is up to us, the community of believers, to see that they do.

Kendra Fleagle Gorlitsky

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 23

Isaiah 55:1-5

What has been learned from the past two years, from our various plagues? What can I do with the lessons of Lent, of observance, preparation, sadness, hope? Spring is coming, again, with new life, again. Another year is marked in the seasons of my life. Do I really get another chance?

The words the prophet Isaiah speaks are, to a material world, counterintuitive: You that have no money, come, buy and eat! What to make of a promised abundance that, at first, is unrecognizable in the daily form I give to my life? Isaiah asks us, “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?”

This is not a call to hopelessness and despair. It is a promise that, should I choose to take it up, I can move through to a life that will satisfy, and be offered what is new and nourishing. It does not come, though, as if by magic, although sometimes serendipity may be at work.

Isaiah gives us the guidebook: Listen carefully, eat what is good. Incline your ear, listen that you may live. Buy the wine and milk without money, that is without price. Be a witness to people. Call nations and people you do not know.

Lent is both a time of renewal and a time for something new, in consciousness, faith and life. That is the promise of creation.

Michael Olsson

THURSDAY, MARCH 24

Isaiah 55:6-9

There are many ways to talk about God, and there are many ways to listen. There are many ways to relate to God, and many ways to be all too human. Sometimes God feels so close to us, our hearts will burst. Sometimes, God feels so distant, we feel a profound solitude.

God will provide drink for those who thirst. To my ear, that speaks to a spiritual longing inside all of us; a thirst for the divine. Humans live down on Earth, but it's our instinct to look up.

God is what we aspire to. And while we can profoundly feel God's presence, we will always continue to look up. God will always be there to reach up to, further away, and yet grander than our minds could possibly contain.

This passage in Isaiah reminds us that God is far beyond. An eternally aspirational goal to which we will never, as a species, stop reaching.

And while God is not aloof, God teaches us that humility is a vital part of our experience. The Lenten season reminds us that we are flesh, that our bodies are vulnerable. We need that reminder to chip away at our stubborn egos. God is above, but will provide drink.

Witney Seibold

FRIDAY, MARCH 25

Isaiah 55:10-13

These verses of Isaiah are a beautiful hymn of rejoicing. Written in the time of the return of the Israelites from Babylon, they lift up the many blessings of God on a people who have suffered for many years.

I feel a similar rejoicing with the coming "opening" of our society to ways we used to think of as Normal. I've come through these past two years with caution and hope. I believe this is probably because I've lived in "safe" communities where most people were sensible about the virulence of the bugs we've been fighting. And the vaccinations and boosters became available, not only for me, but family and the larger society.

I've returned to Disney Hall and the Opera (showing vaccine records and wearing masks) and also some in person parties (showing vaccine records and, well, maybe no masks). Slowly events and life seem to be moving forward.

Despite the rejoicing in Isaiah 55, however, we know that the return to Israel is going to be a difficult one: a temple destroyed, agricultural land in who knows what sort of condition. They were returning to a place that will need a lot of work. But they would be on their own land and no longer be under the thumb of the Babylonians.

Likewise, we will be having to do some adjustment to our new order. I know of people who are still cautious about venturing out. Some have health issues that require them to be especially careful. Reaching out to them will take patience and love. But I pray that all will be able to join life in this new post-pandemic world.

Bee Campbell

SATURDAY, MARCH 26

I Corinthians 10:1-13

Every now and then you run across a Bible verse that matches your personal situation so closely that it seems to have been written exclusively for you.

Verse 12 says “So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.” As I write this, I am suffering from dizziness caused by Benign Paroxysmal Positional Vertigo—BPPV to its friends. (Rather than taking up all my allotted space describing this condition, I would refer you to the Internet, where you can find several very good discussions of it, including Wikipedia and the Mayo Clinic website.) To me, the most important part of the name is the initial “Benign”—it’s a condition that (a) is not life-threatening, and (b) won’t get worse. Unless, of course, I fall, in which case all bets are off.

In today’s passage, Paul talks about how God tests us. He gives a handful of examples from the Exodus story of ways in which the Israelites were tested, including how they failed. He tells the Corinthians (and, by extension, us) to avoid the snares that caught the Israelites. Finally, he gives us the good news that not only will God not test us beyond our limits, but God will give us the means to endure—a “way out.”

BPPV is easy to treat, short-lived, and usually does not recur. Thus, it doesn’t require much personal strength to get through it—just a bit of patience. Many of the tests God throws our way are a great deal more difficult. And for some of them there appears to be no way out other than death.

I must admit to a personal heresy: I am agnostic on the subject of life after death; I neither believe nor disbelieve in it. What I do believe is that whatever God has planned for us after we die will be okay. And from that belief I can draw whatever patience and endurance I will need when my last days arrive.

Dick Crawford

SUNDAY, MARCH 27

Luke 15:1-3

I love the message preceding the parable of the lost sheep that Jesus shares in this passage, The Kingdom of God is accessible to ALL!

My focus on prayer and meditation has increased during the pandemic, much of it because of the ability to be in community with others remotely. I am part of a weekly meditation group and a weekly Centering Prayer Group in Cincinnati Ohio. I am originally from Ohio and enjoy going “home” to pray with my fellow Buckeyes! I pray and meditate because I want to deepen, my relationship with God, the indwelling presence. I have learned that God is within me and there is nothing that I have to do other than yield to God’s presence.

God welcomes us all, sinners and saints alike! God welcomes us all to the table in full fellowship. Jesus goes to where the need is and accepts each of us as a child of God.

“I am not a saint, unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying.” Nelson Mandela

In what ways can we make our church and its fellowship more accessible to all? How might each of us be more like Jesus, eagerly welcoming all to the table?

Leigh Erlandson

MONDAY, MARCH 28

Luke 15:11-24

Would you consider yourself an overachiever? Do you strive to do 110% of what was asked for? Do you pride yourself on being available for others when they need you? Do you ever run yourself ragged trying to serve, without spending enough time to rest or restore your balance?

As an admitted overachiever, my first reaction to the parable of the prodigal son was indignation. I naturally related to the non-prodigal son, who did everything properly only to see his wayward brother welcomed with open arms after abandoning his responsibilities and squandering his fortune. How unfair! I felt this particularly strongly as a child, striving to get straight As, make the team, show up for friends and family.

Over the years, my responsibilities have accumulated, and it is no longer so easy to stay on top of things. Often my kids, spouse, friends, coworkers, parents, in-laws, and even my puppy all want something from me at the same time. It is simply not possible to do everything for everyone. I feel afraid of falling short.

And now I understand the parable of the prodigal son in a new way. It tells us that even if we make mistakes, squander our advantages, and fall severely short of our responsibilities, God will still welcome us with open arms. All God asks of us is to keep trying to do right, and when we make mistakes, God will show us mercy. I can't promise you your manager or friends will be so understanding, but God always will! The prodigal son offers hope and comfort for all of us, the wild children and the overachievers alike.

Dear God, when I am afraid of falling short, remind me that you offer your love and grace to the prodigal son and to me. Likewise, help me find compassion when others fall short, showing them love and forgiveness. Amen.

Julia Thornton Snider

TUESDAY, MARCH 29

Luke 15:25-32

This is the parable of the lost son.

I can definitely understand and empathize with the son who stayed home and helped the family, who didn't leave, frolic and spend money foolishly. I think that would be the natural feeling of anyone.

But, someone who was young (immature) in mind—and age—would only see the world through their own eyes, how it affected them. Hopefully as we grow, gain wisdom and become closer to God, we will see our circumstances differently, with understanding for each other and through the eyes of Christ.

Haven't we all been lost in our lives at one time; done something or behaved in a way that wasn't the way Christ would have behaved? Yes, of course we have. Yet, God forgives us, even the worst of criminals is forgiven. We have a loving God, and a forgiving God. Thanks be to God.

Carmen Herrera

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 30

Psalm 32

Can you see King David sitting on his Throne, alone; hating himself for having missed the mark by taking Bathsheba as his wife, at the expense of Uriah. Can you see David holding deceit in his heart before his people and before his God? Can you see David humbling himself before God in his prayer chamber, confessing his sin and repenting? Can you see King David, his heart, mind and soul, renewed by God, now freed from this sin?

Now you can see, King David rejoicing and praising God like he did when he danced before the Ark of the Covenant. David knows God is real. What would you do if you had the opportunity to be Blessed, like David? What if God said, "I will bless you if you do like that King" or "if you will live in a certain part of Palestine?" What if God said, "I will bless you if you buy a blue Chevy." What would you do? Of course, you would buy a blue Chevy. Psalm 32:8a says "I will instruct you...the way you should go."

The Bible is a practical book and God eminently a practical God. If you make the practical decision to awake to the life of Christian activity and devotion you shall have the peace which passes all understanding.

When the Apostles sat at the feet of Jesus and listened as he preached to them: "If you that are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those that ask him?" It is written, "He will give the Holy Spirit to them that ask."

And the Promise of Psalm 32:8b. "I will counsel you with my eye upon you."

Eric Warren

THURSDAY, MARCH 31

Joshua 5:9-12

No more manna from heaven?

Imagine waking up one morning to find the sustenance you received every day for the past 40 years was gone. I'd panic. It would take me a moment, or two, or three to remember that just the night before I'd shared a meal with my family; food that God provided even if it did not come directly from the heavens. Hopefully, I'd begin to calm down...

God provides. He provides differently over the course of our lives but he always provides. Sometimes the provisions come directly without our having to think about it. Things like meals prepared by our grandma, wise words from our father, unconditional love and endless hugs from our mother. These blessings seem to fall from the sky and blanket us with the love of God.

Overtime, we may "wake up" and find certain blessings no longer seem to fall from the sky. Grandma's meals are no longer laid on a table before us, wise words from a father are no longer heard over the phone, and healing hugs from our mothers are harder to feel. In these life moments, when we wake up to find God's love is no longer there in the same way, we may panic. I think that is okay. Loss is a panic provoking feeling.

We wonder: How will I (fill in your own)? With a few deep breaths we may remember grandma shared her best recipe, she tucked it away in the cookbook on the counter, we can hear those wise words in the still of our mind and those hugs we long for were also shared with a sister and a mother's love can be felt in her embrace.

God's love, care, and comfort is constant. How we experience it will change with time. Sometimes it falls on us directly and we receive it in moments of joy and happiness. In moments of fear and panic we must remind ourselves it is there. The love our God gives us is constant, un-ended and comes as we need it, when we need it; we just need to stop and remember.

Jocelyn Hicks-Garner

FRIDAY, APRIL 1

Psalm 31:14-16

If I had to pick just one word to describe the nature of God, it would be Love. In fact, Pastor Tommy in Texas was very fond of saying, "...because God is Love." That thought made me ponder, if God IS Love, would it be possible to take any verse in the Bible and replace any word that refers to God with the word Love without changing its essential meaning? I decided to give it a try.

The changes took my breath away. By the time I made it to church the following Sunday, I looked up at the stained glass window depicting Jesus knocking on the door of my heart and I rightly saw Love knocking on that door.

I invite you today to find your favorite verse or verses and try this substitution. I've listed the beginnings of just a few I've done.

The 23rd Psalm:

Love is my shepherd. I shall not want.

Love maketh me to lie down in green pastures, Love leadeth me beside the still waters.

Love restoreth my soul . . .

Philippians 4:13

I can do all things through Love, who strengthens me.

The Lords Prayer:

Love, which art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name.

Love's kingdom come. Love's will be done

On Earth as it is in heaven . . .

Palms 31: 14-16

But as for me, I will trust in Love . . .

Dorothy Nichols

SATURDAY, APRIL 2

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

In the movie “City Slickers” three middle-aged men set out on an adventure/vacation cattle drive in Montana. They were childhood friends who are now bored with their lives in the city. One of them is despondent over having left his wife and family for another woman. As he weeps, his two buddies try to console him. One of them remembers what they did when they were kids and got into trouble—they’d proclaim a DO-OVER! That meant that whoever made the goof or mistake would get a second chance—a do-over—to get it right.

I relate to this because I believe that my life has been mostly do-overs. I still get lost. I promise to do better, and sometimes I forget.

The apostle Paul underwent a major do-over on the Damascus Road that changed his life forever. So, in today’s passage he can affirm with conviction that God’s agenda is to lead all of us to the do-overs we need. In Christ we are called to be a new creation in which the old one is gone and the new has come! And just possibly we can inspire others by our example.

I think God wants us to let go of our mistakes and wrong directions and be ambassadors for God. What do-over might you need to consider during this Lenten season?

Jean Young

SUNDAY, APRIL 3

Luke 22:14-23

The account of the “last supper” in the three Synoptic gospels has deep spiritual roots for me. It is the last supper (with the disciples), the first supper (the fulfillment in the new Kingdom), and a continuation of Jesus’ Jewish tradition of the Passover meal. It reflects Jesus’ in-depth knowledge of the prophet Jeremiah 31:31-33: a new covenant. This last meal has various names: the Eucharist, the Last Supper, the Holy Supper and Communion, and has become a tradition practiced in Christian churches around the world.

So today: where do we get our meaning from this sacred meal? Do we just do it by rote, something we do with regularity on the first Sunday of every month? Sadly, I think that is the case. But let’s look at Jesus’ words: “Do this...in remembrance of me.” Do what? Eat this bread, my body which is given for you.” “Drink this...” all of you: “the cup is the new covenant poured out for you.” What a pure gift of God’s grace for all of us. This is not only a remembrance of God’s great sacrifice and suffering for us but God’s unending love for us, and a promise of a future meal with Him in our life everlasting.

My experience with the very generous grace of Communion (my favorite word) was in Haiti when our team was sent to the village of Mellier. At the end of our mission trip, we held Communion with the villagers on the last night of our stay. We held the service on the unfinished floor of the new church, outside under the stars. Everyone was welcome and everybody seemed to realize the very deep connection we had made with these our sisters and brothers. Do this, drink this in remembrance of me. Jesus’ teachings throughout his whole ministry were about relationship, breaking bread with folks like you and me, love and suffering, forgiveness of sins, restorative justice and being the light. I believe Jesus/God wants to be in relationship with us and what better way than by this simple means of sharing a meal. Give us this day our daily bread. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.

Blessing and love to you during this sacred Season.

Martha Ross

MONDAY, APRIL 4

Psalm 126

This psalm opens with the Israelites expressing joyous gratitude to God for releasing them from captivity. It continues with them celebrating their good fortune and ends with two verses that talk about how the depths of sorrow relate to the glorious heights of joy.

These last two verses remind me of a quote from the poet, Kahlil Gibran:

When you are joyous,
look deep into your heart and
you shall find it is only that
which has given you sorrow that
is giving you joy.

When you are sorrowful,
look again in your heart, and
you shall see that in truth you
are weeping for that which has
been your delight.

As we continue to crawl our way out of our own pandemic “captivity,” I pray that all the sorrow we’ve experienced these past two years be transformed into moments of pure joy, true peace and heartfelt recognition of God’s abundant love for us.

Anne Premer

TUESDAY, APRIL 5

Isaiah 43:16-21

As many of you know, I transferred to UC Berkeley this past Fall. It has been a truly unbelievable experience. Here I was in a new city, meeting new people, learning from some of the most amazing professors; yet still, I was not happy. I had this wonderful opportunity in front of me, but I was dwelling too much on all the things I was missing that were back home that I wasn't fully embracing the beauty and good around me.

This passage was something I needed to hear. In a way, it is a wake-up call. While we have all had those great moments and memories in the past, they are not all that we are going to have. The best has yet to come.

We have all faced many challenges over the course of the pandemic. We have all probably said that we wish things were like they were before. But what many forget is that this too is a moment in time, and it will pass. Try to appreciate the good that is in this moment and that has yet to come. Each day, you are doing new things causing amazing things to be set in motion.

For me, this is simply walking through campus and appreciating the beautiful sounds of Strawberry Creek and the campanile. Watching my dog Jack smile as he runs free in the grassy hills at the Berkeley Marina. Or even acknowledging my gratitude for collaboration as I study with my friends for our upcoming midterm.

Each day has something good, something that can make your heart happy. Take a moment today to acknowledge the good in your life no matter how simple it is.

Thanks,
Jamie Jones

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 6

John 12:1-8

My straightlaced father had eight rock albums from the 60s that he'd bought at the recommendation of The Saturday Review magazine. Beggar's Banquet by the Rolling Stones was one. Shine On Brightly by Procol Harum, Wheels of Fire by Cream, Sergeant Pepper's and a few others. I liked the music well enough as a teenager in the 70s. But I was entranced by the art on the record sleeves. Moody, oddball photographs or graphic designs packed, it seemed, with secret meanings that I spent whole A-sides trying to decode.

This passage from John, which is so visually arresting, reminds me of a 60s album cover. We are at a party being thrown for Jesus. Over here is Lazarus, a man recently dead, now being served by his sister Martha. Sinister Judas is also present, whispering a self-serving rebuke disguised as a plea for charity. And at the center of this scene is Lazarus's other sister Mary, pouring a pint (a pint!) of expensive perfume on Jesus's feet and wiping it off with her own hair.

That's the part of this dreamy tableau that grabs me: the strange image of Mary thanking Jesus for bringing her brother back to life. It feels awkward, almost too intimate to look at directly, the rich woman on her knees, undignified, using her hair as a rag to sop up the perfume she'd been saving for Jesus's funeral. But why? What does it signify?

As with Procol Harum, I can only say how it makes me feel. And for me, the very weirdness of Mary's gesture makes it spontaneous, heartfelt, human. We're witnessing a moment of such deep emotion that even Jesus, with little time left, is unwilling to ask her to stop.

Tomorrow I'm going to start helping my dad and stepmom downsize in advance of moving to a retirement community this summer. My dad won't be bringing any records, and if he did, they would be his beloved Gilbert and Sullivan, not the Rolling Stones. But albums or not, I will always carry his music in my heart.

Sam Johnson

THURSDAY, APRIL 7

Philippians 3:4b-14

As I read this, it struck me as an inventory; a real look at where he's been, what he's done, pedigree included, and where to go now.

Paul didn't come upon this way of thinking overnight. After achieving everything that he thought was honorable and respectable—and it was—he feels there is more to himself and life than he had realized. Jesus calls and grabs Paul. Paul no longer needs wealth, power and status; he now simply wants a relationship with God. He leaves it all behind and follows Jesus. His focus is to become part of the cross and resurrection to make it his own to become closer and get deep with Christ.

Dear God, may we be blessed by love and inspiration by you to get to know you, walk with you, and listen to you. We pray that you instill in our hearts pure love for each other, pray for us that we take care of each other. Help us to see and feel in our heart and soul the gift that is you.

Amen.

Sandra Jones

FRIDAY, APRIL 8

John 13:3-10

This passage, where Jesus washes his disciples' feet, is a reminder of how very important it is for all of us to help those around us who need assistance with even the small things in their lives. A kind word or gesture is all it takes. It also reminds me of how important it is for me to be of service to my family, friends and strangers every day of my life.

The importance of caring for every human life no matter what is vital for human existence. It is the cleansing of ones' soul that allows God to do His work as he touches each and every one of us. Thusly, he is giving each of us different abilities to go out into the world to help those who need it most. We are all part of this amazing beautiful vine that intertwines us with our brothers and sisters around the globe.

We then continue this process by teaching it to our children. Then, they too understand and accept the responsibility to continue this process throughout the existence of time. What a beautiful way to have a positive impact on our world! Amen.

Karen Lewis

SATURDAY, APRIL 9

Psalm 118:5-14

Indeed. So many of us cry out to the Lord silently, in anguish, in reverent prayer or in vocalized desperate pleas to halt the despondency, emotional fragility and overwhelming challenges we continue to experience in our daily lives.

God has and will continue to bring us “into a spacious place.” We’re not talking about a huge mall, a trip to some faraway land or even a large, green pasture. Demographics is not what this Psalm is about. That “spacious place” God wants us to discover actually exists in our own abilities—the new answers, the enlightened perspectives, the bigger picture that already occupies our mind and heart. If both can open into that larger place, we will find a fresh outlook free of old stereotypes and tired agendas. Our ability to solve even the most seemingly insurmountable challenge is in our desire to learn, question, and open every door He sets before us—to endure with gratitude and lift each other up no matter our personal adversities.

Aspirations which should, by nature, be the simplest and most basic of desires—peace, compassion, good physical and emotional health—seem now to have only a slight, intermittent chance of attainability. We feel helpless, sad, and injured. But God reminds us while it is natural to possess those feelings, we are none of those. He has made us in His image to persevere, to contribute to one another’s comfort and wellbeing, and to survive now and into life everlasting with great joy and humble fortitude. We therefore carry in our hearts the beauty of hope and new life granted to us by our Lord and Savior through His holy resurrection—a blessed exhilaration no other has ever known, yet all have known. All generations of every nation give thanks, embrace, and celebrate the miracle of renewed spirit. We carry you, oh Lord, in our hearts now and forever!

With love and blessings,

Anna M. Rogers

SUNDAY, APRIL 10: PALM SUNDAY

Luke 19:28-40

Jesus was preparing to go up to Jerusalem. He stopped and sent two disciples ahead to untie a colt and bring it back. If anyone asks, “why are you untying it,” say, “The Lord needs it.” They found the colt, they were asked the expected question, and they gave the answer. The owner did not object. The disciples threw their cloaks on the colt to fashion a saddle, and Jesus began his triumphant journey. The multitude cried out in a loud voice “Blessed is the king!” Some Pharisees warned Jesus that the leaders in Jerusalem would not like these words. Jesus responded that if he told the multitude to stop saying these words, “the stones would shout out.”

It is apparent Jesus was expecting something very special for this short journey from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem. Jesus had walked everywhere in the past. Now he was riding a colt that had never been ridden, something reserved for royalty. He referred to himself as “The Lord.” When the Pharisees warned Jesus to stop the cries of the multitude, his response was that the stones (in other words, all of nature itself) would praise him as the king. As if looking into a crystal ball, however, we know that just five days later, on Good Friday, the multitude would turn on him, his disciples would deny him, and the Pharisees’ warning would come true. He would be condemned.

The multitude turned on Jesus so quickly! Jesus was full of optimism about his future. He would triumph as the Lord and king. But we know, with foreboding, that version of events will never happen. He will not ride a horse again. Instead, he will have to carry his own cross to be crucified. Would we have praised Jesus as Lord on Palm Sunday and abandoned him days later? Hopefully not. We carry in our hearts the beautiful vision of Jesus’ crown he might have worn as king even though we know he will end up with a crown of thorns. Let us all keep the joyous and hopeful spirit of Palm Sunday alive in our hearts even though we know Jesus ultimately triumphed in a very different way.

The Wollitz Family

MONDAY, APRIL 11

Psalm 36:5-10

If you read all of Psalm 36, verses 1 through 4 are quite different than 5 through 10, as the Psalmist, David speaks of the mischievous and deceitful ways of the wicked.

In verses 5 through 10, the Psalmist shifts gears and speaks to the greatness of God's Love and Righteousness. These verses of the Psalm really give me a sense of how powerful and precious God's love is and that we can be certain that we have a wonderful God who loves all creatures of the earth. You get the sense that this Love is that of a parent's unconditional love for a child. This scripture also states that God's righteousness is as steady and strong as a mountain and his judgements are as deep as the oceans. This verse gives me great confidence that I can trust in God's teachings and guidance. The certainty of God's moral compass brings me great understanding as I walk through this life but there have been many times in my life where I haven't felt God's love as much.

I think the psalmist is trying to let us know that even in the midst of turmoil or evil doing by others we can take great comfort knowing that God can carry us through tough times and that God's love endures forever. Setting aside time to appreciate the power of God's love in our lives can help us more regularly feel that love. I try to regularly practice the different ways I feel closer to God. Being in prayer, reading or listening to scripture and most importantly being in community and fellowship with others are a few of the ways that I feel God's love. Knowing that I am surrounded by people that are of like minds and hearts truly makes me feel as though God's Love is being channeled through everyone I know.

David Shepherd Penson

TUESDAY, APRIL 12

Psalm 71:1-16

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world.”

– Marianne Williamson

You were put on Earth for a reason: to have amazing experiences, to do incredible things, to love, to laugh, to dance.

It is easy to forget your purpose:

To lose focus on what you really value in life.

To keep wallowing in mediocrity.

To fail to make today the most important day of your life, every day.

Recognize that you were put here to have wondrous experiences; create goals that define who you are and what you want to accomplish; and maintain a positive focus on your actions and your goals so you will take steps every day to quickly reach them.

Let your light shine, and serve as an example to others.

Dan Stirling

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 13

Psalm 70

Psalm 70 is one of those dire and dramatic psalms. I had a hard time relating to this psalm at first, and hopefully the same is true for you.

Desperate pleas (“help me,” “save me”) and urgent language (“hasten,” “come quickly,” “do not delay”) make it painfully obvious that the speaker is not in a good situation. My first thoughts upon reading these words were thoughts of relief and thankfulness: “thank God I am not in a situation like this.” No one is trying to take my life; no one desires my ruin. My second thoughts were a feeling of even deeper thankfulness and gratitude, to know that even if I ever found myself in such a desperate situation, I have a God that I can call upon for rescue and salvation.

And after reflecting a while further, I thought of how many millions of people around the world would have a very different take on Psalm 70. From far-off regions afflicted by conflict and war, to places much closer to home suffering poverty, division, or hate, I thought of just how many people would recognize the urgency and desperation expressed in Psalm 70 as their own.

Though at first I found it hard to relate to Psalm 70, it became a reminder to me: to be thankful for every day of life lived in relative peace and safety; to be thankful for a God to call upon in those desperate times; and to remember and pray for those less fortunate around the world.

Spencer Dewald

THURSDAY, APRIL 14: MAUNDY THURSDAY

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19 has been divided by some into three parts, those being: I love the Lord because, I owe much to the Lord, I can show my thanks by doing the following...

This Psalm begins with why one should love the Lord. The Psalmist gives us an easy answer: because the Lord listened. This made me stop and think for a moment about what seems to be a very simplistic answer. He listened, but the Lord also heard. Moving to present time and this fast-paced world that we live in: We are often listened to but not really heard as the Lord heard the Psalmist. To be heard gives us a sense of dignity and worth. That what we say and do really matters.

The palmist then moves on to how one should reward such a gift as being heard. This set me to thinking about how I should reward (recognize) those who are kind enough to give me the gift of being listened to but also being heard. Perhaps being as good at hearing them as they are good at hearing me could be the beginning. I could make it a solid and loving two-way street!

As we come to the end of Lent, I hope to continue to find a way each day to give thanks to the Lord for being such a good listener and truly hearing what I really am trying to say and passing that gift of 'hearing' on to others.

May the peace of Christ be with you...

Claudia Flanders

FRIDAY, APRIL 15: GOOD FRIDAY

Psalm 22

CARRY GOD IN YOUR HEART

Good morning, Good Friday morning, God's Friday. Me, standing at the shore. Shattered glass. Christ is bleeding on the cross. My hand is bloody. I had to break the bottle to see the message inside:
"Carry something beautiful in your heart"

Psalm 22: so much bloody ugliness

"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"...O my God, I cry by day, but thou dost not answer; and by night, but find no rest "...
"they have pierced my hands and feet"..."Save me from the mouth of the lion"

This psalm is a deep prayer and cry to God, a guideline for surviving despair. It is a reminder of an all-attentive God. You are heard. You are not alone.

We hurt. We grieve. We struggle. We, sometimes, feel lost and in dark despair. Lucky are those who are able to call out to God, to feel they are listened to in their dark and desperate moments.

The message in the bottle:

"CARRY SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL IN YOUR HEART"

Carry God in your heart. God is inside you. God is in your heart. God is carrying you. God is listening. God hears you. Carry something beautiful in your heart. Carry God in your heart.

Cindy McQuade

SATURDAY, APRIL 16

Lamentations 3:19-24

In Lamentations we read the poetic verses of a book that reflects terrible pain through words of anger, desperation, fear, loneliness and hopelessness. However, these emotions are then tempered by focusing on the goodness of God and knowing the faithful love of the Lord never ends. His mercies never cease.

At the end of this Lenten season, we recognize the miraculous resurrection of Christ and all its glory only after Christ had to endure horrendous suffering and his death upon the cross.

Although we may feel the utmost despair and almost unbearable sadness at the tragic loss of a loved one, we can also receive comfort while enduring our pain by knowing that God will carry us forward with his unending love. He will shed light in the darkness as we continue living in this earthly world with our sights on one day living in heaven.

While loss, especially human loss, may cause the feeling of overwhelming hopelessness, we must keep on looking to the Lord for hope as we mourn. We must remember that God is responsible for bringing people into our lives and it is within his power to decide when they will physically leave us. However, the loving memories we carry from the time shared with a loved one departed is to know we will always carry something beautiful in our heart. Just as we always carry the marvelous understanding of the magnanimous sacrifice Christ made for us to forgive our sins.

Blessings to all,
Nancy Potter

SUNDAY, APRIL 17: EASTER SUNDAY

Luke 24:1-12

This scripture relates the stunning moments when first the women, then Peter, discover the empty tomb. We decided to put ourselves inside the minds and hearts of the women, then the men, to see what we would discover.

Ann: “The women,” and that is how they are named at first, expect to anoint a dead body. They expect to have to deal with death and carry on with daily routines and rituals in the midst of despair. They are shocked out of this expectation. There is no body. There are two men in shining, gleaming clothing who tell them, “He is not here; he has risen!” Then comes a life-altering moment for them, so understated in the scripture: “Then they remembered his words.” [verse 8] I imagine that in that deep, amazing moment, they are filled with joy and the certainty that Christ is risen indeed! Does it bother them that the men later don’t believe them? Probably. Does it bother me when I see the world carrying on like no one believes? Definitely. But what the women know, and what I know, overpowers any feelings of frustration. We carry that beautiful knowledge in our hearts, and we know it changes the world.

David: In this time of skepticism, cynicism and negativity, it’s hard to believe in miracles. Peter couldn’t believe at first. He had to go investigate the tomb himself. But once he did, he realized that God is real, and so is his Son, Jesus Christ. This is a good lesson for us now: miracles do happen. God is in our presence and with us at all times. We have to be careful that we don’t just dismiss things, without really giving it time and allowing belief to sink in. You have two choices: you can either be negative and harden your heart, or you can be a believer. I choose the positive road. I’m a believer.

Dear God, May we all carry something beautiful in our hearts: the discovery, once again, that Christ is risen! Alleluia! Amen.

Ann and David Wilson

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